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The "New Face" of the Khmer Rouge: Implications for the Cambodian Resistance

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An Intelligence Assessment

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May 1987

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The "New Face" of the Khmer Rouge: Implications for the Cambodian Resistance

Key Judgments

Information available
as of 15 April 1987
was used in this report.

The Communist Khmer Rouge has substantially modified its political and military strategy in the past two years as a result of Vietnam's devastating 1984-85 dry season offensive. A major objective of the change, in our view, is to alter the organization's loathsome image inside and outside Cambodia. We believe the Khmer Rouge's ostensible transformation reflects an awareness among guerrilla leaders that their prospects of returning to govern Cambodia and possibly even their inclusion in any diplomatic settlement are best served by more subtle and skillful diplomacy in concert with an effective guerrilla campaign inside Cambodia.

China, the Khmer Rouge's major patron, has promoted this effort as has Thailand, and both countries probably will appeal for wider acceptance of the "new" Khmer Rouge.

We believe the disagreement between the hardliners and the more pragmatic elements of the Khmer Rouge leadership is mainly over the wisdom of temporarily softening the group's approach, not over long-term goals. We believe the group would move quickly to dominate any power-sharing arrangement that came out of an international political settlement of the Cambodia problem, and it would take ruthless measures to regain sole control.

We believe the Khmer Rouge's modified political and military operating style has important implications for the military situation in Cambodia. The renewed focus on waging a classic hit-and-run guerrilla campaign in Cambodia's interior and the modest success in burnishing its image have allowed the group to strengthen its infrastructure in Cambodia and boost its recruiting. We believe these gains help ensure that the Khmer Rouge

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will continue to frustrate Vietnamese designs to consolidate power in Cambodia. On the other hand, we do not expect the group to improve its military effectiveness enough to dislodge the Vietnamese. [REDACTED]

On the diplomatic front, the limits the Khmer Rouge has imposed on Pol Pot's role and its expressed willingness to accept Vietnam's client Heng Samrin in a settlement partially address Vietnamese preconditions for entering negotiations. Although the Vietnamese leaders have long maintained they would never talk with the "Pol Pot clique," they have indicated a willingness to allow certain Khmer Rouge elements to participate in negotiations. [REDACTED]

The new Khmer Rouge approach temporarily enhances the stability of the fragile resistance Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), in our judgment, by easing frictions with the two non-Communist groups. Reduced tensions among coalition partners, moreover, improve the CGDK's ability to function more effectively in the international arena. The softer Khmer Rouge tack toward its resistance partners also facilitates non-Communist guerrilla operations inside Cambodia to some extent. If the non-Communists' performance improved dramatically, however, we believe the Khmer Rouge would act quickly to assert its superiority and undercut the non-Communist resistance groups. [REDACTED]


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Figure 1. "We have adopted a new strategy . . . we need our great national union and we need the support of the whole international community . . . we cannot return to our policies of the [past] . . . if ever we forget [these] lessons, it will be . . . the death of the Kampuchean nation." Khieu Samphan, April 1986

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The "New Face" of the Khmer Rouge: Implications for the Cambodian Resistance

The Impetus for Change

Vietnam's unprecedented 1984-85 dry season offensive that destroyed every guerrilla base along the Thai-Cambodian border prompted the Communist Khmer Rouge to undertake military and political initiatives to recoup these losses. While the Khmer Rouge and the non-Communist resistance factions regrouped in Thailand, Vietnamese forces dug in along the border; Hanoi also accelerated its ambitious barrier construction program there to curtail resistance infiltration. All of this activity, in our judgment, underscored Vietnam's determination to defeat the resistance militarily (see inset, "The 1984-85 Dry Season Offensive: A Key Turning Point in the War").

We believe Khmer Rouge leaders concluded that the dramatic turn of events demanded immediate military and political responses.

The Khmer Rouge accordingly deployed units deeper in Cambodia

The group's military operations over the past two years have been directed largely at strengthening its position in the interior, undermining the Hanoi-backed Heng Samrin regime, and loosening Vietnamese control. On the political front, the Khmer Rouge launched its most concerted public relations campaign to portray the group as flexible, cooperative, and, above all, rehabilitated. We believe the group seeks to gain a measure of

Glossary of Terms

Democratic Kampuchea: The Khmer Rouge

The National Army of Democratic Kampuchea: Khmer Rouge guerrilla forces

Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea: Includes the three resistance factions—the Khmer Rouge, the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, and the Sihanoukist National Army—and is recognized by the United Nations as the official government of Cambodia.

Political Programme of the Patriotic and Democratic Front of the Great National Union of Kampuchea: A political program announced by the Khmer Rouge in 1979 to mobilize and unite all patriotic forces to fight the Vietnamese.

domestic and international credibility from this program to complement its military campaign and to improve its chances for securing a role in a postsettlement government.

China and Thailand: Key Accomplices

China, and to a lesser extent Thailand, have long prodded the Khmer Rouge to moderate its policies and behavior. In our view, the Khmer Rouge has been somewhat more responsive to Beijing's wishes over the past two years. For example, China has been angling for some time to limit Pol Pot's visibility, but the Khmer Rouge moved to do so only after the sobering Vietnamese offensive in the 1984-85 dry season.

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*The 1984-85 Dry Season Offensive:
A Key Turning Point in the War*

In mid-1984, signs began to emerge that an important change in Hanoi's military strategy was afoot. After a series of attacks against resistance camps late in the 1983-84 dry season (November-May), Vietnam broke with its traditional pattern of hunkering down in rear area garrisons during the wet season and kept several units along the Thai-Cambodian border to pressure guerrilla forces. This set the stage for the extraordinary 1984-85 dry season offensive, which marked the unveiling of a new game plan that Hanoi hoped would break the stalemate in Cambodia. We believe Vietnamese strategists calculated they could reduce the resistance to a nuisance and relieve Hanoi of much of its military burden in Cambodia while retaining de facto control by:

- Driving the resistance into Thailand.
- Constructing an intricate defense system of physical barriers and deploying combat units along the border to curtail guerrilla infiltration.

- Mopping up guerrilla units in Cambodia's interior.
- Intensifying efforts to develop self-sufficient People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) forces.

Hanoi's multiphased strategy has unfolded slowly since 1985. The Vietnamese still have most of their combat forces—10 of 11 infantry divisions—working on securing the frontier, and tens of thousands of civilians continue to construct barriers there, according to reliable sources. The PRK military, however, is developing at a snail's pace and, in our judgment, is far from being able to assume primary responsibility for internal security.

ruthless past.

We believe the Thai prefer any outcome in Cambodia—including a Khmer Rouge return to power—to permanent Vietnamese dominance there.

The Chinese are working with Thailand to promote the Khmer Rouge. Thailand has acted primarily as a facilitator in the public relations campaign, but it supports the program's objectives, including blurring the distinction between the three resistance groups in an effort to take the edge off the Khmer Rouge's

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China's Limitations

Although one of the most powerful players in Cambodia, Beijing depends on the cooperation of several countries and groups that, in varying degrees, distrust the Chinese and seek to constrain their influence. For instance, China's ability to manipulate the Khmer Rouge is limited, in our judgment.

intentions and Beijing's close relationship with the Khmer Rouge. Indeed, China is striving to reassure ASEAN that it seeks only to frustrate Vietnamese and Soviet designs in the region and not to reestablish a Khmer Rouge regime.

China's leverage over the group, in our judgment, will continue to be tempered by the mutually dependent nature of the relationship. As the only militarily effective resistance force, the Khmer Rouge is well aware of its central role in Beijing's game plan to undermine Vietnam's designs on Cambodia. With this in mind, the group remains staunchly independent and continues to resist external influence.

Despite their reservations, these countries agree with Thailand that preserving ASEAN unity and preventing Vietnamese consolidation are the more immediate concerns and that dressing up the Khmer Rouge is necessary to support their policy at least for now.

At the same time, Beijing must be careful not to exacerbate deep-seated misgivings in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) over Chinese

The New Look

Image building is not a new element of Khmer Rouge strategy and current efforts—like ones since 1979—largely entail self-serving and cosmetic gestures.

Nevertheless, in our judgment, guerrilla leaders have a newfound awareness that political survival depends on:

- *Gaining wider acceptance inside and outside Cambodia.*

- *Maintaining at least a facade of a working relationship with the non-Communist resistance.*
- *Staying alert to efforts to foreclose Khmer Rouge participation in negotiations and any resulting political settlement.*

we believe the "new" Khmer Rouge image is designed to portray an organization with a new ideology and a new leadership willing to work with the other Khmer factions for the good of all Cambodians.

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No Longer Communist. The program kicked off in July 1985 with a communique outlining the group's vision of a postsettlement Cambodia. In it, the Khmer Rouge publicly renounced Communism in favor of democracy and capitalism. Furthermore, it again endorsed Prince Sihanouk as the rightful leader of the Khmer people and expressed its willingness to accept the outcome of free elections.

Under New Management. The Khmer Rouge also moved to distance itself from Pol Pot, who personifies the group's past excesses, and to dismantle symbols of his power. For example, Pol Pot in September 1985 was "retired" as supreme commander of the army ostensibly to head a new advisory organization called the Higher Institute for National Defense. As his successor, the Khmer Rouge named Deputy Prime Minister in Charge of National Defense Son Sen, who is not perceived as being closely associated with the group's brutal regime, even though he is a longtime member of Pol Pot's inner circle. Concurrently, the Khmer Rouge dissolved the Supreme Military Council of Democratic Kampuchea, which Pol Pot had chaired (see inset, "Pol Pot's Deathwatch: An Exercise in Deception?").

A Team Player. Shortly thereafter, the group tried to demonstrate some flexibility toward the three other competing Khmer parties—the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), the Sihanoukist National Army (ANS), and Vietnam's client People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) regime led by Heng Samrin. In March 1986, the Khmer Rouge agreed to the CGDK eight-point peace proposal, which for the first time offered to accept the Heng Samrin faction in a postsettlement government. The Khmer Rouge then took the first concrete steps toward adhering to the concept of a united resistance front, which it has espoused since 1979, by forming political and military coordinating committees that it hailed as an important step toward meaningful cooperation between the three resistance factions.

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Pol Pot's Deathwatch:

In September 1986, reports [redacted] indicated that Pol Pot was terminally ill with lung cancer and had only months to live. Rumors quickly surfaced thereafter that the enigmatic Khmer Rouge leader was already dead.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Pol Pot's political stature within the Khmer Rouge has eroded markedly over the past year or two.

[redacted] We find it interesting, for example, that public disclosure of his purported illness came shortly after Vietnam signaled its willingness to allow Khmer Rouge representatives—other than Pol Pot—to participate in negotiations.

Guerrilla leaders also began emphasizing the need for greater cooperation in the field with their non-Communist counterparts. For example, Khmer Rouge leaders directed subordinate units to cooperate with the non-Communists. Armed clashes between the resistance groups, a common occurrence until late 1984, have dropped off sharply since then, and reports of joint attacks—featured prominently in Khmer Rouge propaganda—have increased.

We believe the limited number of KPNLF and ANS troops deployed deep in the interior remain there only through the sufferance of Khmer Rouge forces, which are numerically superior and firmly ensconced in these traditional strongholds.

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Figure 2. Khmer Rouge troops help local civilians harvest crops in the interior.

The group maintains a tough regimen in Khmer Rouge-controlled refugee camps, where strict discipline, unquestioned acceptance of the leadership's political program, and complete devotion to the struggle to "liberate" Cambodia are demanded.

Behind the Facade: Little Change

Unable to defeat the Vietnamese on the battlefield, Khmer Rouge leaders, in our judgment, have chosen what they believe is the most promising avenue for recapturing sole power in Cambodia. Cooperation with the non-Communists and conciliatory overtures to Heng Samrin are probably little more than expedient maneuvers to ensure the Khmer Rouge a foothold if Hanoi tries to negotiate a solution.

Because they control most of the military, the hardliners are a powerful force that the pragmatists must accommodate to some extent. Furthermore, should philosophical differences and the lack of a well-defined succession mechanism lead to a power struggle, the hardliners almost certainly would win. They would then move quickly to purge perceived challengers, in our view, and would revert to more traditional strong-arm tactics.

For now, however, both sides continue to focus on fighting the hated Vietnamese, preferring to avoid the internal disruption of a power struggle that would play into Hanoi's hands militarily and politically.

We believe the Khmer Rouge's fundamental Maoist ideology is unchanged and that—if left to its own devices—it would again establish a harsh totalitarian regime intolerant of opposition if it came to power.

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Implications of the New Look for ...

... The Khmer Rouge Guerrilla Effort

[REDACTED] we believe the image-building program, combined with several other factors, points to increased local backing for the Khmer Rouge. It already enjoyed a good deal of residual popularity in outlying areas that traditionally provided strong support.

[REDACTED] In addition, Vietnam's occasionally heavyhanded approach in Cambodia, which features forced conscription for barrier construction and service with PRK Armed Forces and sometimes violent reprisals against suspected resistance collaborators, abets Khmer Rouge proselytizing. Vietnamese and PRK officials are countering this activity with intensified propaganda efforts of their own. They strive to keep the memories of Khmer Rouge brutality fresh in the minds of Cambodian civilians while emphasizing Vietnam's exclusive role in ending this dark period and helping to promote Cambodia's "rebirth" (see appendix B).

On balance, however, we believe these developments will improve somewhat the organization's ability to recruit inside Cambodia and, perhaps ultimately expand its military capabilities.

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Taken together with the manpower available in the refugee camps, however, we believe this rate would permit only limited force expansion even if achieved consistently over an extended period. Casualties probably offset most of this growth, and Khmer Rouge officials apparently also have concluded that a much higher recruitment pace is needed to meet their growth objectives.

Moreover, we believe there are important limitations on the Khmer Rouge's ability to integrate the new troops and measurably increase its combat potential. The recruits from the interior almost certainly require extensive training to develop military skills on a par with the average Khmer Rouge soldier.

Even if these problems are overcome, recruits probably are treated with suspicion by their counterparts and commanders, who are always wary of infiltration by Vietnamese-sponsored agents.

These factors lead us to conclude that the Khmer Rouge is operating near its full potential. We believe the prospects for a serious Khmer Rouge challenge to Vietnamese control are remote over the next several years, barring an unlikely substantial growth in guerrilla strength. Although its interior campaign has

steadily gained momentum since 1985, the Khmer Rouge has not seriously threatened the major population centers, transportation routes, or military and economic installations.

We believe, however, the Khmer Rouge will remain a painful thorn in Hanoi's side and will upset Vietnam's plans for substantially reducing its military presence in Cambodia, pushing withdrawal well beyond Hanoi's 1990 target date.

... The Resistance Coalition Government

So far, the Khmer Rouge has not, in our view, won many converts within the non-Communist resistance or the international community with its new look.

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Nonetheless, the Khmer Rouge drive for acceptance temporarily enhances the stability of the CGDK. Khmer Rouge leaders apparently have a greater appreciation of the fragile and interdependent nature of relations with the non-Communists. The leadership probably is apprehensive, for instance, over the disarray within the KPNLF that has been worsening steadily since late 1985 and the political damage a Front collapse could do to the coalition. Continued non-Communist ineptitude on the battlefield also contributes much to these improved atmospherics within the CGDK, in our view. Without competition on the battlefield from militarily effective counterparts, the Khmer Rouge probably will strive to maintain smooth working relationships with the non-Communists as long as it believes its own objectives are served.

The Prospects for Negotiations

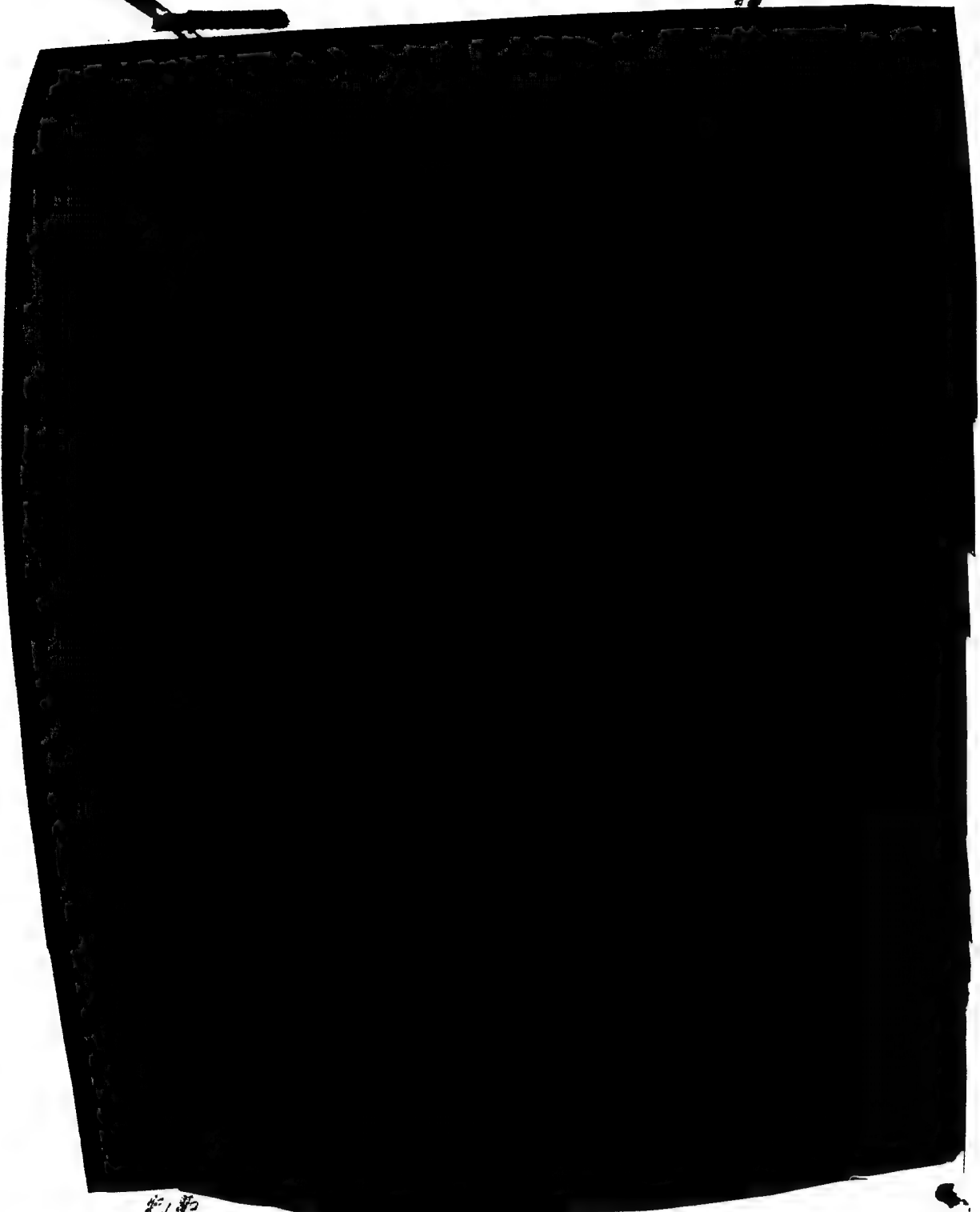
We believe recent changes in the Khmer Rouge's political and military tactics help improve the diplomatic atmospherics surrounding Cambodia. The group's more cooperative and pragmatic attitude allows the CGDK greater maneuverability and reduces the risk of damaging public displays of internal conflict. With dissension reduced, the CGDK, we believe, will be better able to respond coherently to Vietnamese diplomatic probes. In addition, Pol Pot's lower profile and the espoused Khmer Rouge flexibility toward the Heng Samrin regime at least partially address important Vietnamese and Soviet preconditions to serious talks on Cambodia. Although Hanoi and Moscow remain adamant that the "Pol Pot clique" must be eliminated, they apparently have tempered their antagonistic positions toward the Khmer Rouge over the past year or so. According to official statements by both governments, they are now willing to permit limited Khmer Rouge participation in a settlement, although they remain somewhat vague on which elements are acceptable.

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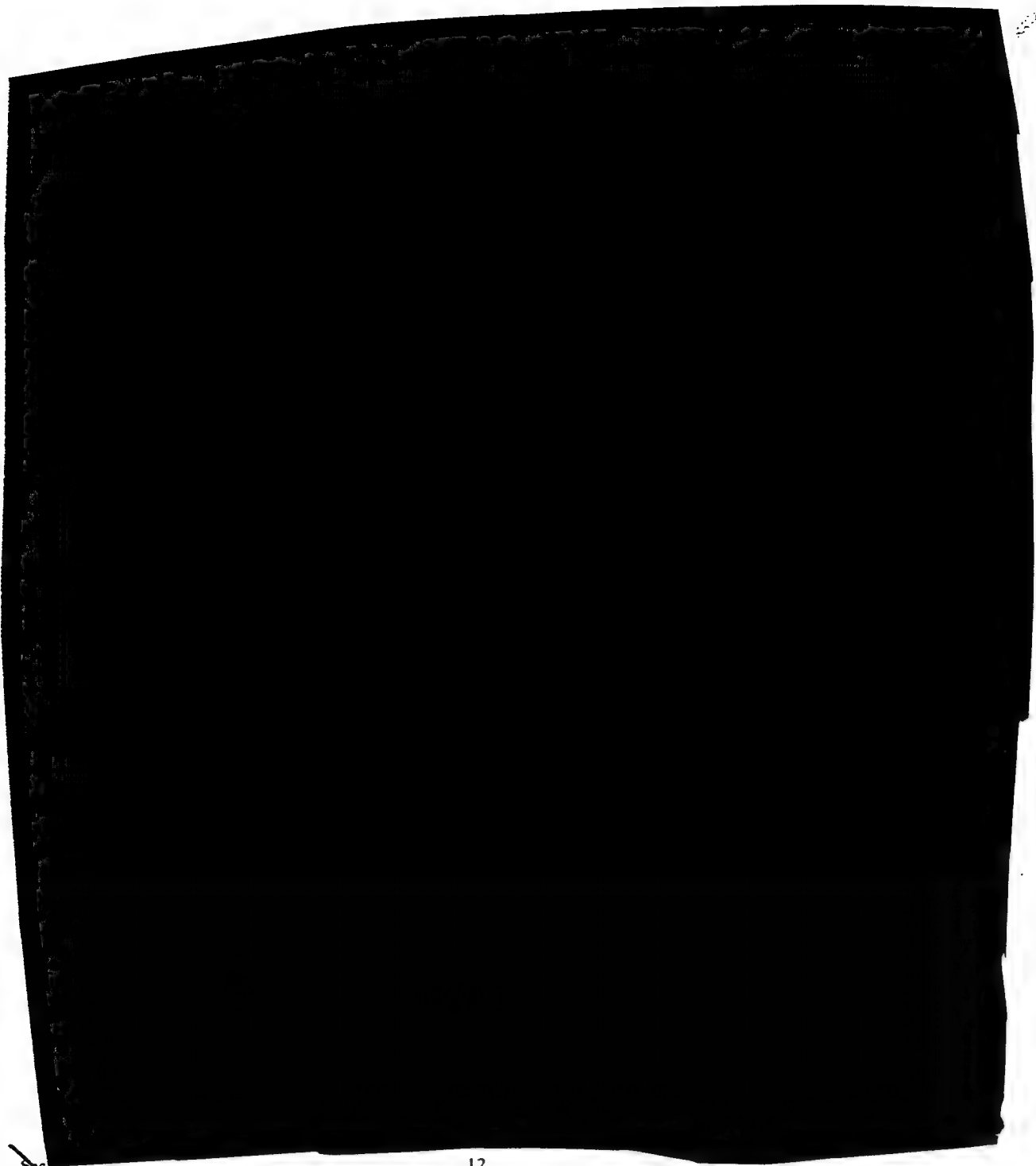
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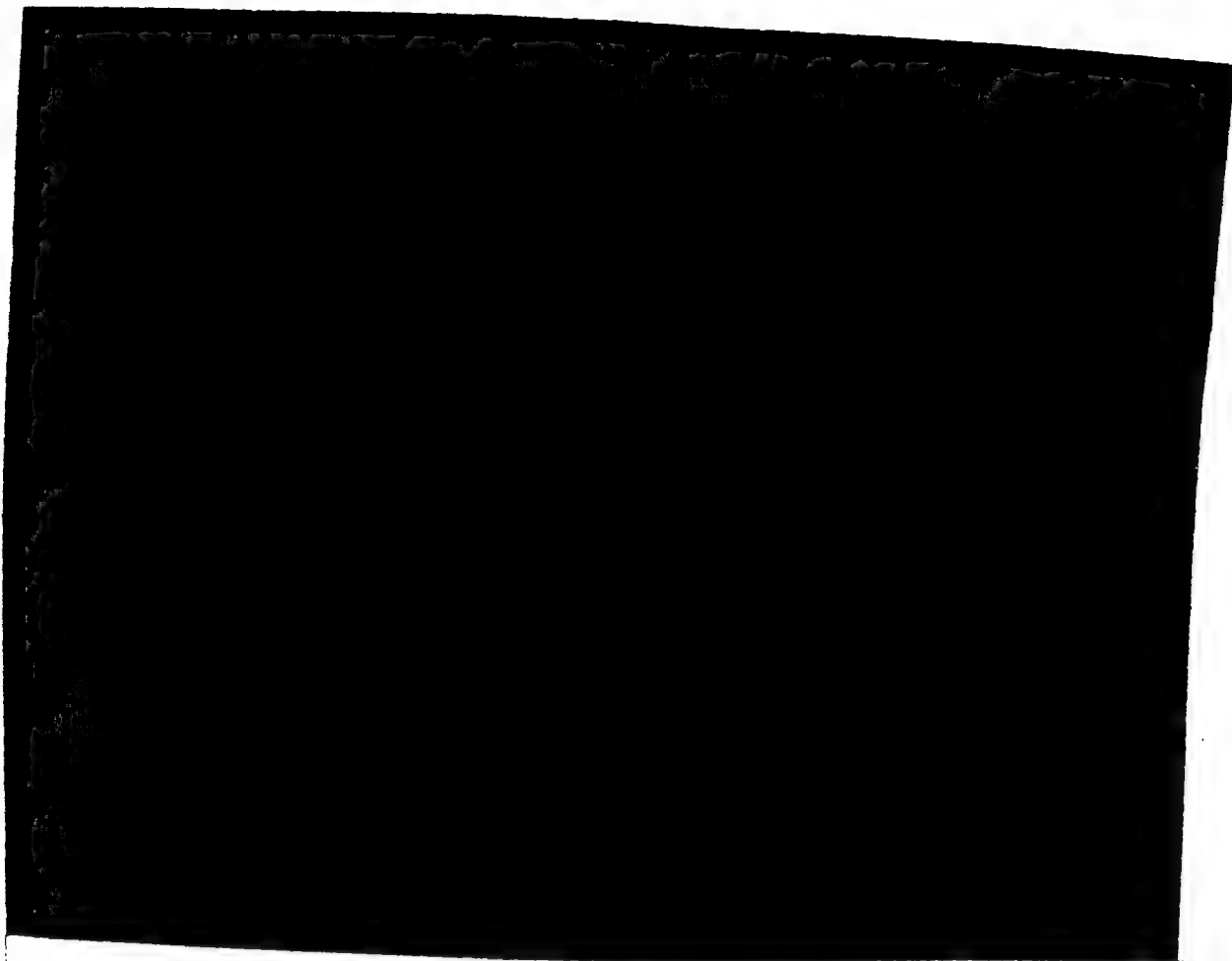


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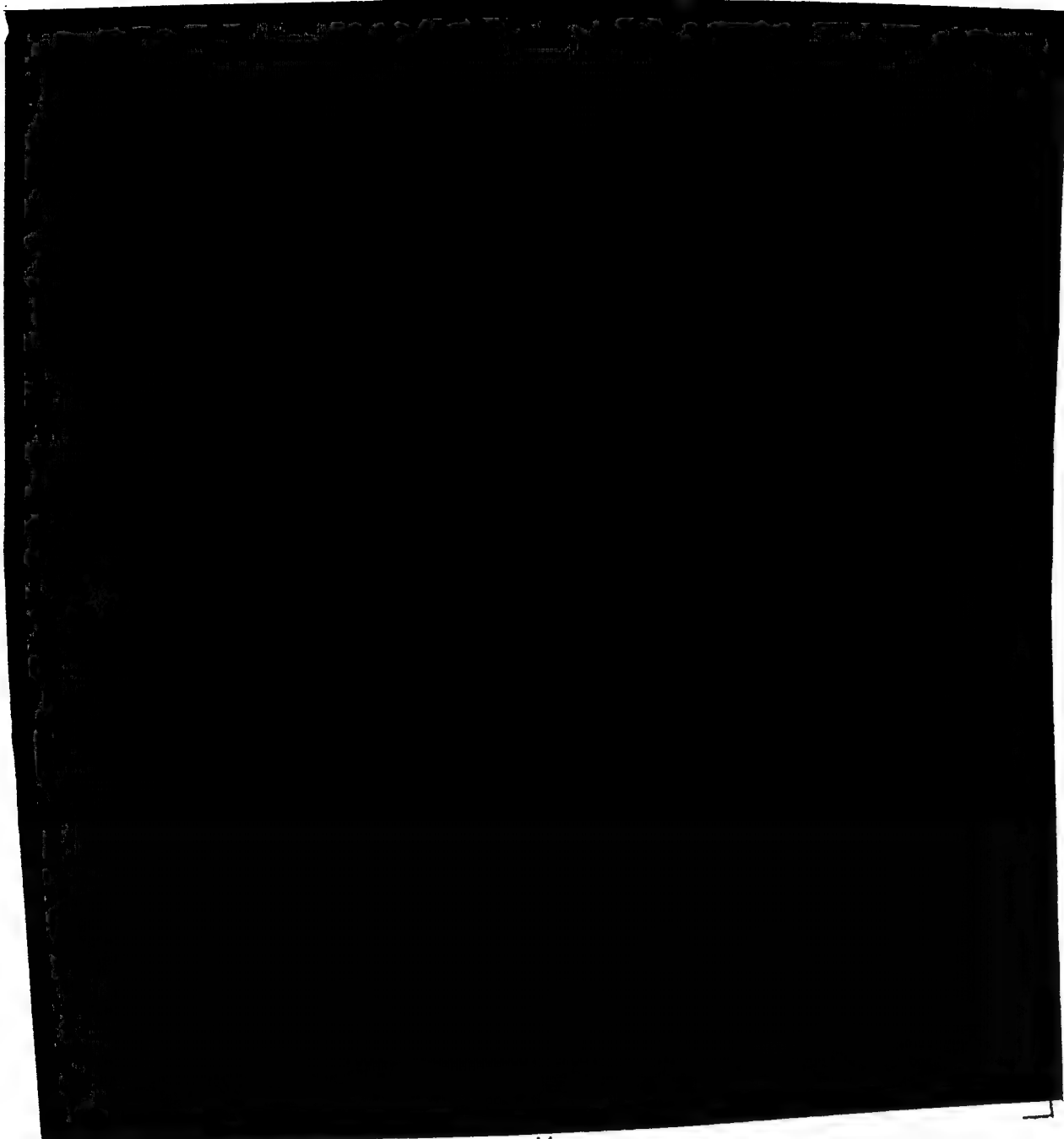


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Appendix B

The Khmer Rouge Guerrilla Campaign

Almost immediately after the last of its border bases fell to the Vietnamese in 1985, the Khmer Rouge moved to intensify guerrilla activity inside Cambodia. To accomplish this, it shifted the focus of most of its 30,000- to 40,000-strong military forces to the interior; there, local commanders worked to expand their areas of operation and their civilian support networks. Khmer Rouge strategists also enacted several structural and tactical reforms to facilitate long-term guerrilla operations far from border staging areas.

The Khmer Rouge also has improved its cumbersome logistic system, which depends largely on female porters, by forming several new transportation units. In the north, for example, they formed a new division from existing personnel dedicated to supporting at least two combat divisions deployed deep in the interior. The guerrillas also are working hard to meet their nonmilitary needs locally, thus allowing transportation units to concentrate on hauling war materiel. For example, they are using cash and goods to procure supplies from villagers in many rural areas. Nonetheless, the dependence on long and vulnerable supply links to the border limits the group's operations inside Cambodia.

Khmer Rouge planners have laid out specific objectives for their units. They rank the destruction of local People's

Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) administrative facilities at the top of this agenda, followed by efforts to entice PRK troops and local administrators to join the resistance. We believe these two priorities signify the paramount importance the Khmer Rouge attaches to undermining Vietnam's client regime. Guerrilla forces also are targeting Vietnamese lines of communication, military positions, and population centers.

In our opinion, this set of objectives provides a useful framework for assessing Khmer Rouge performance. The guerrillas clearly have increased the tempo and expanded the scope of their operations, which, in our view, has helped slow already flagging Vietnamese

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progress toward establishing a self-sufficient client regime. The unsettled security conditions caused by the guerrillas create an inhospitable environment for a fledgling government to take root, in our view. The guerrilla activity highlights PRK shortcomings and undermines to some extent PRK propaganda claims that it is Cambodia's best hope for the future. In addition, the prospect of combat with the feared Khmer Rouge and a general aversion to fighting fellow Khmer make service with PRK forces all the more unattractive to reluctant conscripts and contribute to their high desertion rate, poor morale, and abysmal performance.

On the other hand, the Khmer Rouge will remain well short of meeting its stated objectives, in our view. The existence of local government facilities in rural areas indicates Vietnam is having modest success in establishing an administrative apparatus, even though thus far it is barely functional. The Vietnamese also have maintained their communications links despite occasional disruption. Hanoi's ability to sustain up to 10 combat divisions along the Thai-Cambodian border for nearly two years, in our view, is a good

indication of its ability to adequately secure long logistic lines. Moreover, although the Khmer Rouge has scored occasional tactical successes against emplaced Vietnamese and PRK forces, it has been unable to control the high ground overlooking vital guerrilla supply points and transportation routes. As for the population centers, guerrilla forces have had minimal success in undermining Vietnamese control, and the damage inflicted has been modest.

Khmer Rouge units launched small-scale raids—normally by firing a few rockets or mortars at long range—against nearly all of the provincial capitals during the 1985-86 dry season, but this activity has declined markedly since then despite Khmer Rouge claims to the contrary.

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Appendix C

Khmer Rouge Refugee Camps: The External Support Base

Almost every inhabitant of Khmer Rouge-controlled refugee camps contributes to the war effort in some way. Most able-bodied males join the military and unmarried females generally join transportation units that form the backbone of the Khmer Rouge's logistic system.

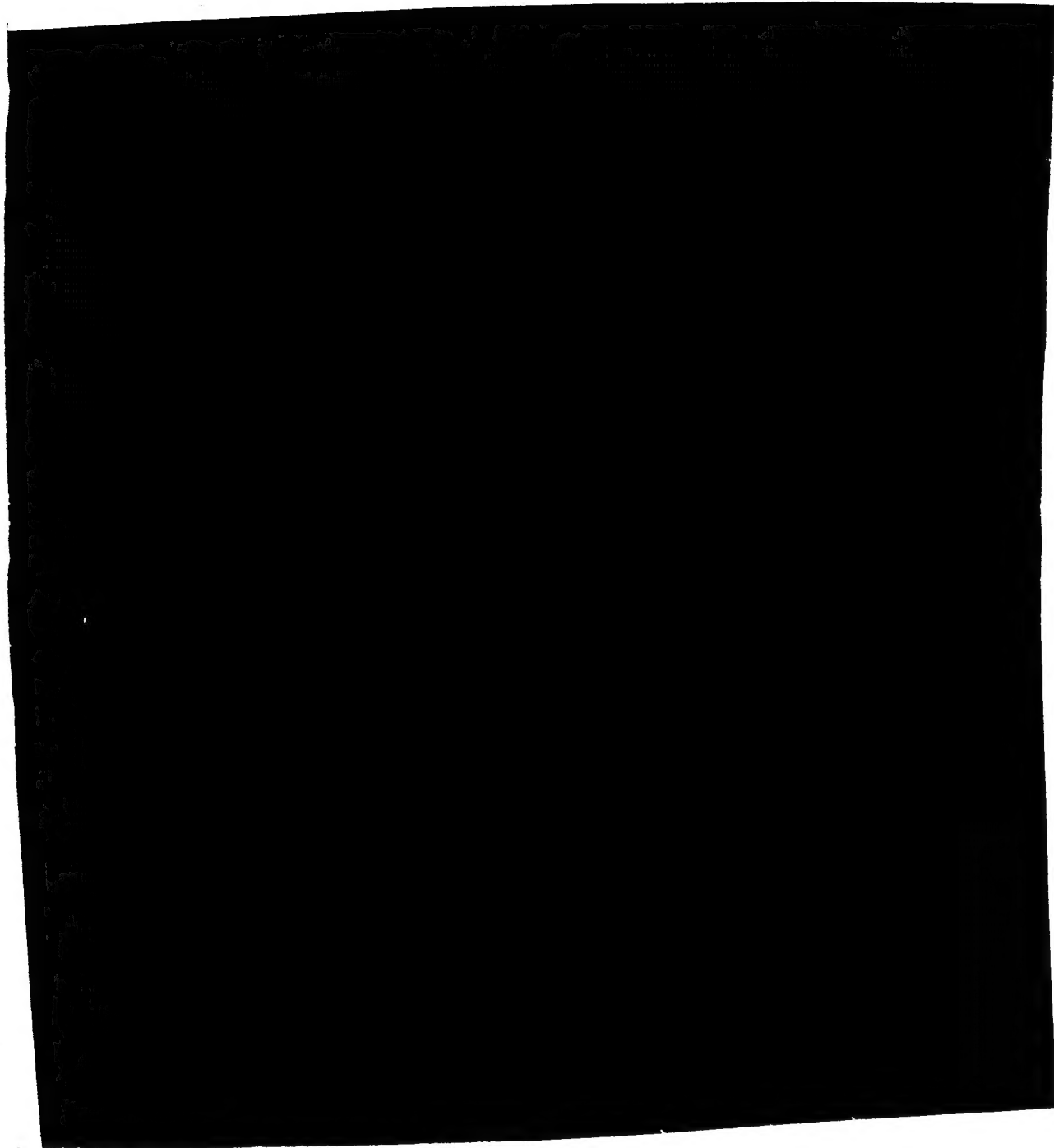
Others who do not serve directly with the military help by constructing crude weapons such as punji stakes, growing crops, and performing a variety of other duties. The camps also serve as sanctuaries for Khmer Rouge units to rest and regroup as well as staging areas for guerrilla operations in Cambodia.

Nonetheless, while the Khmer Rouge depends heavily on the camps to sustain its war effort, the available base of manpower apparently cannot support force expansion.

Although the organization has drawn most of its new recruits from this population in recent years, we estimate that its military force has remained between 30,000 and 40,000 troops. This underscores the importance of the group's stepped-up recruiting drive in the interior since any measurable expansion in Khmer Rouge forces probably will have to come from the rural populace inside Cambodia.

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